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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 QUITO 000744

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [EC](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADOR: STAYING THE COURSE

REF: GUAYAQUIL 424

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney. Reason 1.4 (b&d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former president Abdala Bucaram's precipitous return to Ecuador has brought government stability issues again to the fore. Bucaram remains a government ally, but we believe the controversial decision by the Supreme Court President will provoke a reaction by the opposition aimed (again) at unseating Gutierrez. As a first step, we expect the main opposition to call for a national strike after meeting on April 5. To advance U.S. interests, we will use all available opportunities to encourage prospects for stability and dialogue. End Summary.

Bucaram Back; Opposition Reaction Delayed

¶2. (SBU) RefTel describes Bucaram's dramatic return to Ecuador and his welcome home celebration in the streets of Guayaquil. Political reaction has been delayed, thus far, and crowded out by news of the Pope's passing. The streets have been relatively calm, with no major mobilizations except Bucaram's raucous reception in Guayaquil. Opposition groups began huddling to plot strategy only on April 4. President Gutierrez has avoided comment on Bucaram's return thus far, except to imply that he was not involved. The independent Solicitor General publicly criticized the basis for court chief Guillermo Castro's decision absolving Bucaram of pending corruption charges, which is likely to generate actions to challenge or remove Castro from the court. (Note: As a result, we have entered a lookout on Castro into the visa system as a possible flight risk and will suggest he refrain from a planned holiday in the U.S. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Obviously taken by surprise by the Bucaram return, sierra-based opposition groups have coalesced around the Assembly of Quito, an ad-hoc mixture of local government leaders and civil society. They will meet on April 5 to discuss launching a national strike. They reportedly have been in contact with key mayors (including Jaime Nebot of Guayaquil) to give any strike national scope, and have invited all mayors to attend the April 5 session for the same reason. The main indigenous organization, CONAIE, has called for an assembly of its own to discuss possible mobilization against an FTA and pending economic reform legislation. Separately, Quito Mayor Paco Moncayo and Chamber of commerce leader Blasco Penaherrera Solah publicly called for unspecified civil disobedience against the government. Military leaders have denied the existence of any dissension on political issues among the officer corps.

US Interests and Action Plan

¶4. (C) Though himself a Gutierrez ally, Bucaram's return could end the government's working alliance with banana magnate Alvaro Noboa (PRIAN), putting the government's survival at risk. Noboa's support for the government has never been unconditional, and preventing Bucaram's return was the presumed condition.

¶5. (C) Bucaram's return thus indirectly threatens this government's stability, but our core interest in promoting stability is not fundamentally changed. Political stability (here understood as preventing the unlawful and premature overthrow of a democratically elected president) is necessary to consolidate democracy, assure continued economic progress and support the rule of law. With this government newly vulnerable to its critics, we are carefully weighing our public actions for their likely effects on democratic stability.

¶6. (C) In coming days we will meet with key political players here and in Guayaquil (Minister of Government Ayerve, Presidential Secretary Polit, and leaders from the PRIAN, PRE, PSC, ID, civil society and indigenous groups) to encourage democratic behavior. The Ambassador has several upcoming opportunities to reiterate US stability concerns, and the visit by JCS Myers on April 11 offers an opportunity to emphasize military respect for civilian authority in a democracy. To all, we will continue to encourage strengthening of democratic institutions, including an independent and better-functioning judiciary. In doing so, we hope to revive dimmed prospects for dialogue, interrupted by Bucaram's return. To Bucaram, we will make clear (through

intermediaries) our strong objections to his pro-Chavez,
anti-U.S. discourse.
KENNEY